INSIDE THE MINDS OF EXECUTIONERS: Reimagining the Loss of Life in the 1965 Indonesian Killings

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The Act of Killing (TAOK) focuses on a small number of perpetrators most of whom are in the Pancasila Youth, a vigilante organization that together with the military carried out the 1965 killings in Sumatra. Rather than attempting to document the 1965 violence in its totality this part-documentary, part-fictional film within a film, exposes how mass murderers live with what they have done. A central theme is the impunity the perpetrators enjoy. This is emphasized throughout the film as Pancasila Youth figures explain the term “*preman*” (free man) and their enduring belief that the violence in the mid sixties was justified.

Because of the global acclaim that followed screenings of *TAOK* in film festivals across the world filmmakers Joshua Oppenheimer et al. have created a new spotlight on the 1965 killings, a case that has never fully captured the attention of the world due to cold war politics.¹ The statement of one of the main characters of the film, Adi, that “war crimes are defined by the winners” in this case rings true.²

Although, for example, there are multiple motivations for the mixed tribunal in Cambodia, in the last two decades this case has received sustained Western interest and governments have made enormous aid contributions to the trial meanwhile ignoring the case of 1965 in Indonesia.³ Explanations for this include recognition that many people in the Indonesian government have no interest in revisiting this past because they were directly implicated in it; the economic risks of offending a government with an increasingly lucrative domestic market and control of abundant natural resources the perception that Indonesia is now

¹ Media coverage of *TAOK* and the related setting of the 1965–68 violence throughout the world has been extraordinary. See, for example, Bachelard 2012 and Ziv 2012.

² *The Act of Killing* 2012

³ On motivations for the Cambodian mixed tribunal, see McCargo 2011.

democratic; and an assumption that Indonesians are no longer impacted by this period. The fundamental reason for the discrepancy in this case, however, is that the lives lost were those of communists, losers in the global cold war.

In *TAOK*, audiences are reminded of this loss of life over and over again through the reenactments of torture and killings. Whatever the intention of the perpetrators acting out these scenes, as we watch the vile methods of strangulation by wire or breaking a neck under the leg of a table in the film, we can't help but imagine the moments of death of those who died.⁴ Despite the focus on the perpetrators the dead are thus constantly conjured in the torture scenes and in the filmic portrayal of the nightmares of the film's key protagonist, Anwar Congo. The only direct connection, however, in the film between the abstract loss of life and the living is via Suryono, the child of a murder victim.

Oppenheimer carefully chose each scene from 1,200 hours of footage and then sequenced the scenes.⁵ Because of the nature of the film as a film within a film imposing order on this material was a complex process. I would thus like to concentrate on two related scenes in the film that touch on the intergenerational suffering that the violence caused and in particular on the impact of the loss of life of those killed on their families.

The first scene centers on a conversation between the two former executioners and longtime friends, Adi and Anwar, in the tranquil setting of an outdoor pond. After they haul in a catch of fish Adi lets out a chuckle and a long sigh as if he is completely at ease. Then he opens a conversation with Anwar about the impact of the violence.

{dialog will be indented, with quotation marks removed}

Adi: Sometimes I think if I was the child of a PKI and my dad was killed I would be upset [*sakit hati*].

That's normal right? I am upset, okay. Upset. For example if you killed my father I'd be upset with you.

⁴ Most were not killed using these bizarre methods; executioners with knives murdered most victims in the jungle or on riverbanks.

⁵ Oppenheimer 2013.

Why did you kill my father? Then if you don't let me go to school. You make it hard for me to work. You don't even let me marry. This needs to be changed. There's been no apology. But what's so hard about apologizing? The government would apologize, not us. It would be like medicine; it would reduce the pain. Forgiveness.

Anwar: Wouldn't they curse us secretly? They curse us secretly because if they cursed us openly they would be arrested!

Adi: So they whisper their curses?

Anwar: For me, Adi, [In slow, staggered speech] in the end I'm disturbed in my sleep. Maybe because when I strangled people with wire I watched them die...

Adi: But you used other methods, you also watched.

Anwar: Yes, but when I'm falling asleep, it comes back to me. That's what gives me nightmares. [long pause]

Adi: You feel haunted because your mind is weak. The people we killed lost. Even when they had bodies they lost. Now they only have spirits. So they're even weaker. How can they haunt you? But if you feel guilty then your defenses collapse. Have you ever been to a neurologist?

Anwar: If I went to a neurologist it would mean I'm crazy.

Adi reassures Anwar about going to a psychiatrist.

This scene is striking because of the empathy Adi, a perpetrator of harm, displays towards the children left behind by the murders and because of his acknowledgment of the discrimination that these children faced. This included formal discrimination against those accused of involvement with the 30 September Movement and their families in the form of no rights to become public servants or teachers due to the fact they were from an "unclean environment," but also informal discrimination.⁶ Ongoing state-sanctioned demonization of communists in Indonesia has meant that families that survived the violence have faced

⁶ For a list of discriminatory laws related to those accused on involvement in the September 30th Movement, see Hutabarat 2011, 143–47.

restricted opportunities for work and thus higher rates of poverty. Children were thus sometimes not able to attend school. In addition they were repeatedly rejected by society because of the dangers associated with the label communist. In many ways these children, along with former political prisoners and their families, became Indonesia's version of the untouchables. The experiences of children whose parents were imprisoned or killed have received some treatment in the films of Putu Oka Sukanta and Robert Lemelson,⁷ but we still know very little about how they coped not only with the deaths of their parents, but with the double trauma of on-going stigmatization.

Although in general Adi does not express remorse for killing, he regrets the effects of the violence. In recognizing that those left behind must secretly curse them Adi and Anwar reveal that they are aware of the deep social fractures that the violence caused in broader society. Somewhat surprisingly Adi states that there should be an apology to reduce "the pain." It is unclear when this scene was shot as the film took seven years to make, but in the same year the film was released (2012) Albert Hasibuan, the minister for politics, law and security, began to speak publicly about the possibility of a presidential apology for all past human rights abuses accompanied by the creation of a compensation fund.⁸ Due to the pressure of anticommunists—including a petition signed by Pancasila Youth amongst other organizations and statements by leaders of Nahdlatul Ulama—President Susilo Bambang Yudohyono did not apologize as expected in his Independence Day address in 2012.⁹ In this context Adi's support for an apology is significant, especially when read alongside other perpetrator accounts such as those in the special edition of *Tempo* magazine in October 2012, which was inspired in part by the film and in part by the president's failure to apologize. In some of the accounts in *Tempo* perpetrators express no regret for any aspect of the violence.¹⁰

⁷ Wiranegara 2007 and Lemelson 2010. For a preliminary discussion of the intergenerational effects of this violence, see McGregor 2013.

⁸ Pramudatama 2012.

⁹ Siswadi 2012; and Revianur 2012.

¹⁰ See, for example, the story of Mochamad Sansi in 'Haram membunuh cicak jika belum membunuh kafir', 2012., p. 66. {move details to References and translate title}

In response to Anwar's experience of nightmares and being haunted by the violence Adi implies he feels no sense of guilt toward the dead. He also believes that any apology should come from higher up. In an untranslated line just after this he asks: Who are we?, as if to suggest that they are insignificant players. This is certainly true in the larger scheme of the violence, but it is a common trend amongst perpetrators to deflect any responsibility. Katharina Von Kellenback observes that when on trial former Nazi's repeatedly stressed the "corporate nature of the violence and portrayed themselves as servants of the state...and refused to concede individual intent or motivation."¹¹ Adi here similarly takes no individual responsibility for his actions.

Two scenes later on, after the directors shoot a torture scene for the film within the *TAOK* film, Suryono, Anwar's neighbor, who has been on the set all the time, discloses his stepfather was murdered in 1965. He nervously tells the story of how as a child of eleven or twelve he witnessed his stepfather, with whom he had lived since a baby, being taken from their home after a loud knock on the door at 3 a.m. His father cried out for help and then was taken away. After a sleepless night Suryono's family found the father's corpse under an oil drum the next morning; Suryono had to help bury the corpse because nobody else would assist due to fear of being viewed as sympathetic to a "communist."¹² Then, Suryono explains, all PKI families including his were exiled to a shantytown at the edge of the jungle. This is why, he explains, he never went to school and taught himself to read and write.

Suryono's disclosure shifts the mood on set, but the perpetrators proceed to shoot a scene in which Suryono acts out the role of an accused communist under interrogation. Anwar and Adi explain first what they would usually say to a person who was about to die and what the intended victim would typically reply. I wonder how these disclosures affected Suryono. Did they help him to reconcile his traumatic

¹¹ Von Kellenbach 2013, 16.

¹² In *Tempo* magazine an executioner similarly notes that they never buried the corpses of the people they murdered. Instead they left them out on the roadside so that their families could recover the bodies for burial. This could have been an act of kindness or an act of terror or both. 'Kami tidak pernah mengubur', 2012, pp. 62-63.

past? Rithy Pan, the Cambodian director of the film *S-21: The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine* (2003) and more recently *Missing Pictures* (2013), and whose own family was killed by the Khmer Rouge, observes: “We the victims also need the words of the perpetrators to tell their side of the story.”¹³ Suryono’s face continues to look sullen after his disclosure in *TAOK* and he hangs his head. He is blindfolded and gagged. The interrogators then proceed to try and comfort Suryono by insisting that he take and drink of water, crassly joking that it is not poisoned and then tipping the water over his head. They give him a cigarette then continue, but Anwar notes ‘this is sadistic Adi’.

As viewers or voyeurs we then witness Suryono’s frightful imagining of the last moments of his father’s life as he acts out the scene. This is a scene he has probably already played out in his mind repeatedly due to the human desire in cases of murder to know how, when, and where a loved one actually passed away.¹⁴ Conjuring up his stepfather’s imagined actions with closed eyes Suryono weeps and begs his interrogators to pass on a message to his family amidst his final interrogation.

Interrogator: What were your activities?

Suryono: Have mercy on me [weeping uncontrollably with mucus spouting from his nose].

Interrogator: Should we kill him?

Suryono: Wait would you give a message to my family?

Interrogator: Sure. [Suryono is blindfolded again.]

Suryono [weeping]: Or could I speak to them one last time?

Interrogator: No way.

Through Suryono’s facial expressions, as he weeps uncontrollably, the audience and the torturers gain a small glimpse into what it was like for those left behind. We are invited to join Suryono in imagining the

¹³ As quoted in Camhi 2004, 24.

¹⁴ Samuels 2008, 512. For more extensive reflection on this related to mass graves in Indonesia, see McGregor 2012.

last moments of his father's life. In his word choice Suryono expresses sorrow that he had no chance to say good-bye.

In the conclusion of this scene the torturers tighten the wire around Suryono's neck. Adi, the director of this scene, instructs Suryono to drop his head as if he is now dead. The camera moves to a shot of Anwar Congo, to remind us that *he* is "shooting" this scene and witnessing the interactions with Suryono. {what follows is unclear to me: you open with a general "those who" but then switch to Suryono's case; try to structure the second part as the "other" choice: one can expose themselves...or *what?* I hope this is clearer I was still focusing on Suryono} The scene is deeply unsettling because Suryono from the vulnerable position as a child of a murder victim seems compelled to tell his story to these former executioners perhaps out of loyalty to his step father's memory. Yet in this brave act he forces the executioners to confront one example of a family destroyed during this horrific violence. The filmmakers did not know about Suryono's background prior to this.

The impact of this unexpected disclosure and Suryono's grief on the perpetrators leads to a rare moment of self-reflection. Adi lectures the film crew and Suryono that this film and this scene in particular will show that in fact they, the killers, were "the cruel ones," not the communists as the propaganda film *Pengkhianatan G30S/PKI* [the government's docu-drama about 1965] leads viewers to believe.

Reassuring his fellow perpetrators on set Adi, however, confidently claims that this case has already legally expired, noting: "It is not a problem for us it is a problem for history." Technically the case has not necessarily expired due to the provisions of Law No 26 2000 that allow retrospective prosecution of gross human rights violations with the approval of the attorney general. Yet despite the National Commission of Human Rights' findings announced over a year ago that the 1965 was a case of gross human rights violations, the attorney general has chosen not to form a tribunal on the grounds of incomplete evidence. For now at least it seems that Adi and his fellow perpetrators will continue to enjoy their lives as free men.

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